DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 134 269 JC 770 109

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TITLE The Public Information Office--A Working Model.
INSTITUTION Lee Coll., Baytown, Tex.
PUB DATE [76]
NOTE 10p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Role; Community Colleges; *Community Involvement; Community Role; Information Dissemination; *Junior Colleges; *Models; Publicize; Public Opinion; *Public Relations

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a model for public information offices in community colleges based on the operations of the public information office at Lee College. Seven basic principles describe the model: (1) educate the public regarding the role and scope of the college within higher education; (2) encourage active participation in the life of the college from as many publics as possible; (3) facilitate evaluation of the total institutional effort; (4) reflect through publicity the several dimensions of the college; (5) scientifically approach the planning of the public relations program; (6) create special events and activities tailored specifically for unique publics; and (7) tell the press the truth. Some of the public information/relations activities engaged in by Lee College have included periodic news releases of staff and student events, promotional advertising, dissemination of informational brochures, operation of a continuing education division, multimedia presentations at social and civic clubs, organization of special events, surveys of community opinion for gathering community input into college decisions regarding college operations and program offerings, and organization of an area basketball tournament. (JDS)

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The Public Information Office - A Working Model

BY ROBERT C. CLOUD AND C. GLEN WALKER

Colleges and universities do not exist to make a profit, but rather to meet the educational and training needs of society through instruction, research, and public service. In fulfilling this basic mission, institutions of higher education must face a more sophisticated, more serious, and more interested public than ever before. It is a knowledgeable and demanding public that must understand the value of higher education to the nation if it is to continue its support through taxes and donations. The public insists, and rightfully so, on knowing about its system of higher education; and the individual institution has the responsibility to help the public understand what it is and what it is trying to do. The principal agency for fulfilling this responsibility in many colleges is the public relations office. At Lee College in Baytown, Texas, this public relations function is performed by the Public Information Office.

Public relations may be defined as those activities which enhance public understanding of higher education and provide college officials with an understanding of public opinion in order to help the college improve its service to society.[1] The public relations officer thus must be an articulate spokesman for his institution and an attentive listener to the institution's constituents.

The modus operandi of every effective public relations office is influenced greatly by the nature of the institution itself and its community. The Lee College community is a vigorous, growing industrial center with an

accelerating influx of newcomers. There remains, however, a solid core of long-time residents, many of whom were instrumental in founding the college more than 40 years ago. From 1934 to 1965 the college was an integral part of the local public school system and was viewed by many of its supporters as grades 13 and 14. Since being granted administrative autonomy in August, 1965, Lee College has moved deliberately to provide the programs and services of a comprehensive community college.[2] Serving 5,000-6,000 students each fall and spring semester, Lee has almost as many occupational-technical students as academic and a growing continuing and adult education division. The work of public relations personnel at Lee College is shaped by factors such as these.

Public relations at Lee College is a primary responsibility of the Public Information Office which is staffed by a director, an editorial assistant, and full-time secretary who also sponsors the student publications program. The purpose of the office is to initiate and facilitate communications among the various publics in the college service area. A team approach is used to address this purpose.[3] The principal members of the team are the president, public information officer, administrators, faculty, and governing board. The Lee approach is intended to encourage continued support from local taxpayers and increased enrollment from students, to facilitate improved morale and performance from faculty and more meaningful leadership from administrators, and to provide feedback from the community for use in decision making.

Seven basic principles undergird the Lee College public information office:

1. Educate the public regarding the role and scope of Lee College within higher education.

   As a community college in the Texas higher education system, Lee is charged with the responsibility of providing quality instruction in traditional academic courses, technical-vocational programs, and continuing education. At Lee as in other two-year colleges, these instructional efforts are buttressed by a comprehensive program of student services. Defining and interpreting this mission to the public is a primary responsibility of the public information office.

2. Encourage active participation in the life of the college from as many publics as possible.

   This effort transcends public attendance at athletic events, music concerts, and graduations to include involvement in campus improvement projects, use of the library, long range planning, and direct input into the instructional program. The classroom, the laboratory, the field trip, the library: these comprise the essence of the college experience. Consequently, it is important that the various publics understand and catch the flavor of these daily activities because too often the most widely publicized and attention-getting are the grand occasions which do not always reflect a true image of the institution, its activities, and its people.[4]

3. Facilitate the evaluation of the total institutional effort.

   The emphasis is on publicizing that performance of the institu-

tion that merits recognition and improving that which does not. All members of the public relations team participate in shaping the performance of the college before attempting to promote it.

4. Reflect through publicity the several dimensions of the college.

   At various times, publicity focuses on such areas as student recruitment, faculty and administrative appointments, building programs, program development, and continuing education opportunities. This approach has a two-fold purpose: (1) it emphasizes the multi-dimensional nature of Lee College and (2) each release addresses a special target group. This maximizes the transmission of information through specialized readership for one or more publics.

5. Approach scientifically the planning of the public relations program.

   Public attitudes and opinions change rapidly and frequently, especially in areas of rapid population growth and industrial expansion. Lee College evaluates its image with the public periodically and applies the findings in planning its public information program. One example of this effort is the community information survey in which the service area is surveyed; the data generated are considered in decision making relative to program development, public relations, student services, and bond elections.[5]

6. Create special events and activities tailored specifically for unique publics.

Because of the comprehensive purpose of the college, an attempt is made to involve as many segments of society as possible in the activities and services of Lee College. Specific events feature senior citizens, ethnic groups, the hearing impaired, service and civic organizations, special interest groups, and many others.

7. Tell the press the truth.

This is perhaps the most important of all those principles guiding the public information office; without the trust and support of the local media, the total public relations effort is negated. All pertinent information that is of a public nature, whether reflecting positively or negatively on the college, is released to the press. This approach obviously presupposes a close and highly professional interaction between college personnel and members of the press. It requires good judgment, restraint, and mutual respect on the part of all concerned but is worth the effort because both the college and community are beneficiaries.

The specific functions of the Lee College Public Information Office include such routine matters as periodic news releases of course offerings, new programs, administrative changes, faculty additions, student activities, and public meetings. Promotional advertising centers around image development with an annual theme, e.g. "Brighten your future at Lee College," "It costs less to go first class at Lee College." The college enjoys a good rapport with local and area newspapers, the local radio

station, and high school publications.

The office also routinely prepares informational brochures for the college, its divisions and departments. Frequently, special events are staged to attract various publics to the campus and actually involve them in the activities of the college. The celebration of the fortieth anniversary of Lee College was one such event. Another was a bicentennial "Festival of the Trees" at Christmas. A summertime effort brought small groups of community leaders to the campus for an informal breakfast with question and answer sessions. An annual invitational basketball tournament which includes area high schools attracts yet another segment of potential students to the college.

Through the continuing education division, a highly successful senior citizen program is involving many long-time area residents in the current concept of the "now" college.[6]

Several multi-media presentations of different aspects of the Lee College Story are available for civic and social club programs. The college has also received excellent response from exhibit booths at expositions and fairs coordinated through the public information office. By actively participating in the meetings of the administrative council and the governing board, the public information officer is able to provide input into decisions which impact on public interests while they are still in process rather than after the fact. This helps to reduce the "fire-fighting" function with which many public relations offices find themselves confronted.

A public information committee which helps to guide the overall work

of the office includes representatives from the faculty, administration, student body, and general public.[7]

An attempt at periodic evaluation of the public information office is coupled with the regular gathering of data through the community survey previously mentioned. A carefully prepared questionnaire is mailed out to a random sampling of the immediate community, the college district and the larger service area. The questionnaire is prepared with the help of instructors from the social science, psychology, and computer science disciplines. Its purpose is to provide information about community attitudes which will enable the college to serve its publics better, to measure the effectiveness of past public information office performance and to chart the course for future public relations efforts. Four basic answers are sought through the survey to accomplish these purposes: What does the public know about Lee College? What do they think about Lee College? Where and how did they learn what they think they know about Lee College? How do they feel about current program offerings? With the help of the college computer, the results of the survey are scored, weighted, and utilized by the administration in most major decisions affecting the direction of the college. For example, the college initiated an associate degree nursing program in 1975 as a direct result of input from local hospitals and medical personnel through the community survey concept. The program currently enrolls 25 ADN students, some of whom will graduate during the current academic year to take their place of service in the community. This same approach led to a decision to postpone indefinitely the establishment of an instructional child care program. Careful study of child care agencies in the

area indicated insufficient need for graduates of such a program. The Lee College Classic, an annual holiday basketball tournament is a direct result from survey input by area high school coaches. Finally, information generated from the community survey also impacts directly on the objectives and activities of the community information office.

Although a college or university can conceivably exist and even prosper without the benefit of an effective public relations office, someone will be performing the public relations service if that college is indeed fulfilling its responsibilities to society. It follows then that the increased public demand for continuous accountability by institutions of higher education makes the work of the public information officer an essential piece in the total jigsaw picture of comprehensive service to the community.[8]

Footnotes

1. Fred A. Woodress. Public Relations in the Community/Junior Colleges, (Danville, Illinois: Interstate Publishers and Printers, Inc., 1974), p. 21.

2. Minutes of the regular meeting of the Lee College Board of Regents, August, 1965. Statement of Purpose, Lee College Bulletin, 1976-77.

3. Charles N. Pappas, "The President and Public Relations," Community and Junior College Journal, 46 (April, 1976), pp. 14-17.

4. Stephen C. McCutcheon, "Principles of Public Relations," College and University Journal, 12 (January, 1973) p. 10.

5. Rene G. Atkinson, Anthony E. Crosby, Jr. and Paul R. Lyons, "Evaluating Public Relations Through a Community Survey," College and University Journal, 12 (September, 1973), pp. 30-32.

6. Minutes of the Lee College Board of Regents workshop and regular meeting, December 16, 1976.

7. Minutes of the organizational meeting, Lee College Community Information Committee, July 17, 1974.

8. Owen C. Elder, Jr., "Communication Made Comprehensive," College and University Journal, 13, (May, 1974), pp. 30-32.

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